

「A special report on telecoms in emerging markets」 The Economist September 26th 2009 を読む

Mobile marvels

- Poor countries have already benefited hugely from mobile phones.

Now get ready for a second round -

BOUNCING a great-grandchild on her knee in her house in Bukaweka, a village in eastern Uganda, Mary Wokhwale gestures at her surroundings. “ My mobile phone has been my livelihood, ” she says. In 2003 Ms Wokhwale was one of the first 15 women in Uganda to become “ village phone ” operators. Thanks to a microfinance loan, she was able to buy a basic handset and a roof-mounted antenna to ensure a reliable signal. She went into business selling phone calls to other villagers, making a small profit on each call. This enabled her to pay back her loan and buy a second phone. The income from selling phone calls subsequently enabled her to set up a business selling beer, open a music and video shop and help members of her family pay their children's school fees. Business has dropped off somewhat in the past couple of years as mobile phones have fallen in price and many people in her village can afford their own. But Ms Wokhwale's life has been transformed.

Ms Wokhwale prospered because being able to make and receive phone calls is so important to people that even the very poor are prepared to pay for it. In places with bad roads, unreliable postal services, few trains and parlous landlines, mobile phones can substitute for travel, allow quicker and easier access to information on prices, enable traders to reach wider markets, boost entrepreneurship and generally make it easier to do business. A study by the World Resources Institute found that as developing-world incomes rise, household spending on mobile phones grows faster than spending on energy, water or indeed anything else.

The reason why mobile phones are so valuable to people in the poor world is that they are providing access to telecommunications for the very first time, rather than just being portable adjuncts to existing fixed-line phones, as in the rich world. “ For you it was incremental—here it's revolutionary, ” says Isaac Nsereko of MTN, Africa's biggest operator. According to a recent study, adding an extra ten mobile phones per 100 people in a typical developing country boosts growth in GDP per person by 0.8 percentage points.

In 2000 the developing countries accounted for around one-quarter of the world's 700m or so mobile phones. By the beginning of 2009 their share had grown to three-quarters of a total which by then had risen to over 4 billion . That does not mean that 4 billion people now have mobile phones, because many in both rich and poor countries own several handsets or subscriber-identity module (SIM) cards, the tiny chips that identify a subscriber to a mobile network. Carl-Henric Svanberg, the chief executive of Ericsson, the world's largest maker of telecoms-network gear, reckons that the actual number of people with mobile phones is closer to 3.6 billion.